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ABSTRACT

Testifying to the virtues of teaching at an all-women's college (Mills College, Oakland, California), a male tenured professor of communication and film acknowledges the necessity of making difficult decisions concerning course content and focus. Through several uncomfortable experiences, he has learned what it is like to be gender conscious; he has also felt the frustration of being excluded from certain types of relationships with his students. Many of the courses at Mills take a distinctly gender focus, but some courses should be taught that are not especially tailored to an all-women's student body. In film courses, for instance, a mostly male canon is still the rule, since students cannot go on to graduate school unfamiliar with John Ford, Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, Spike Lee and others who have introduced important stylistic innovations. Nevertheless, socially corrective judgments can be made: D. W. Griffith's "Intolerance" can be shown instead of "The Birth of a Nation"; "Gone with the Wind," despite its portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara as both a scheming bitch and hard-nosed survivor, can be shown instead of contemporary blockbusters that do little but exploit the image of women. Furthermore, student participation can be encouraged to offset the imbalance in courses in which the primary material features mostly male voices. Teachers and students can also use the mostly male canons to analyze what criteria have been used to measure success over the years. (TB)

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TEACHING GENDER ISSUES AT A WOMEN'S COLLEGE: A MALE'S PERSPECTIVE

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When Colleen asked me to be on this panel I told her that I didn't really have much to offer regarding incorporating gender material into my classes, because as a male at a women's college--no, make that a white male at a Northern California women's college--I don't have to teach gender communication, I am gender communication. However, I'm happy to add my remarks to the panel's other contributions this morning, and while I'm not the official respondent I know that with the name of Kenneth Burke you probably expect me to do a rhetorical analysis of something, so I may function a bit in the respondent's role just because of the perspective I'm offering.

I work in an environment of about 800 female undergraduates, served by a faculty that is fairly evenly divided between male and female, along with an administration and staff that is mostly women (except for the maintenance workers). Only one of our seven top college officers is male, as is one of four academic deans. We have established an Institute for Women's Leadership, and we're becoming very successful at attracting a student body largely composed of what we call "resumers," women who are returning to college after some years of professional and/or family life. There is also a rather overt feminist attitude to much of what we teach about and concern ourselves with, so much so that some of my advisees have chosen to transfer elsewhere because they're tired of everything being connected to issues of gender and gender inequity. Many others, however, are quite happy with the Mills status quo.

Oddly enough, though, Women's Studies is just a program at Mills (one of only two on campus, along with Book Arts) balanced against seventeen other academic departments, with only about 35 courses of well over 500 campus-wide devoted

specifically to women's topics. Thus, I seem to be not alone in de-emphasizing gender components in my courses, although it is my understanding that many of my female colleagues, more so than the males, use a gender focus throughout their classes that is not apparent from reading the catalogue descriptions. As a specific example I can cite our Sociology of Mass Media course, required of Communication majors but presently taught in the Sociology Dept. One of my advisees recently wanted to drop the class and wait a couple of years for me to rotate back to teaching it because the current instructor was relating every aspect of media analysis to women's issues while I still teach it much the same as I did in a co-ed environment.

However, I am well aware every minute I am on campus that my presence as a male carries some stigma of the outsider, despite my acceptance as a valued, effective--and, now, tenured--teacher (As a matter of fact, because I had to fly out yesterday afternoon to be here this morning I missed the annual Senior Pin dinner last night where I was a contender for honorary membership in the senior class--my third nomination, I'll proudly add.). And while I think it's quite appropriate for a white male to finally have even a taste of the segregation that has so long oppressed women and people of color in this society, my status just reinforces the reality that everything I say or do at Mills becomes an obvious moment of gender communication, no matter what my intentions. And, quite honestly, many of those moments are very uncomfortable or confusing.

Another way for me to put my gender situation into focus would be to digress for a minute and cite an analogy from the news last summer. On July 22 and shortly thereafter, Illinois Senator Carol Moseley-Braun received quite a bit of coverage for leading the defeat of Jesse Helms' attempt to renew the U.S. patent on the insignia for the United Daughters of the Confederacy because of its inclusion of the Confederate flag. However, on that same day she also got into a confrontation with Orin Hatch that was not, to my knowledge, covered as well as the Daughters of the Confederacy issue.

In this situation, Hatch was questioning now-Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in her Supreme Court nomination hearings. In his attempt to argue against support for abortion, Senator Hatch compared Roe vs. Wade to the infamous 1857 Dred Scott ruling. Hatch's premise was that both were examples of bad law, one for condoning abortion the other for condoning slavery.

Senator Moseley-Braun stopped the proceedings by noting that "This line of questioning I find personally offensive. . . . I find it very difficult to sit here as the only descendant of a slave. . . and hear a defense, a legal rationale, for slavery that can be discussed in this chamber at this time." Hatch countered that he was not trying to justify slavery but rather to cite bad judicial judgment in what he called "the all-time worst case in the history of the court"; however, he also apologized to Moseley-Braun for any offense he caused. While you might see this as a reasonable example of a white person who simply doesn't "get it" regarding the issue of race, I have to admit that given what I've read of this incident I don't "get it" either and would probably have been just as dumbfounded as Senator Hatch. Even after the fact and trying to be aware of racial sensitivity (and not in any way agreeing with Hatch's position on abortion), I still see his analogy as valid, at least from his perspective, and don't understand how the reference to slavery was inappropriate in the historical context in which it was presented. This kind of thinking obviously colors my experience and effectiveness at Mills.

Therefore, like Hatch, neither did I understand how offensive I was being in referring to a nude woman in a Diane Arbus photograph as being "slightly overweight." The comment was casual and offhand, actually offered as part of a quick description of an image in the context of a discussion on pornography and what constitutes objectionable material. Suddenly my intended concentration on what was art, what was obscene, and who should be empowered to draw such distinctions was brought to a screeching halt by a normally silent student in the back row who literally yelled

out, "She's not overweight!" Again like Hatch, I was caught red-faced and apologized for the unintentional offense; I also offered the observation that by modern society's commercialized appearance standards--no matter how unjustified they may be--the woman in the photo would be considered by many men and women to be overweight, as many women her size have been in countless advertisements, which was part of the meaning I saw Arbus trying to impart in her photo. Given all the abrupt laughter that accompanied my student's outburst, though, I doubt that much of anything except my embarrassment was conveyed or retained at that point.

While that has been a fairly isolated incident in my six and a half years at Mills, and while even on the day of that ill-fated lecture I was still welcomed by the students as the only male speaker at a rally held in support of their struggle to keep Mills as a women's college, I doubt that I will ever be able to overcome what I experience as a gender-contaminated existence. Just being the only male in a room of several dozen females can become an issue, as it did when I requested the option of sitting in on two of my colleagues' courses in sociology and anthropology. In that these classes are allowed to count toward the Communication major and because I found myself with some unexpected free time about a year ago, I decided to invest in the opportunity to see what was being presented to our majors in related fields. However, there were students in each class who didn't mind my occasional presence but requested that I not come to every class meeting because it disturbed what would have been an all-female environment. Similarly, when I have taught about issues of pornography and its connection to rape and other violations of women I have felt uncomfortable both in presenting the material (because I find these acts of violence so disgusting) and in being a male discussing atrocious male behavior. But what am I to do in such a situation: bring in a female colleague to present the material so that there might be a freer dialogue even though I will miss what is said by my own students, or videotape the session for my benefit even though that just further intensifies the issue of my

presence and puts the chill of public documentation on what should normally be a private classroom interaction?

For me, these are issues that never occurred when I taught in a co-ed environment, nor for that matter did issues of gender differences even come up in my previous positions at the University of Texas, Queens College, or Southern Methodist University. Admittedly, my subject matter of film history and criticism, communication theory, broadcast programming and regulation, and production areas of photography, audio, and multimedia did not seem in the 1970s and early '80s to involve issues of gender, nor was I ever challenged then by a female student about lack of awareness or attention to women's issues. Even at Mills I still find many areas, such as the basic design course we call Visual Communication, where the gender of the communicator is not something I find a need to make an issue of. Likewise, in my one-semester compressed film history course I say little about women filmmakers except for how sexism and lack of opportunity has allowed so little of their work to become well known and influential (although in discussing Lyrical Realism I break away from the traditional canon somewhat by showing Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust rather than Jean Vigo's French classic L'Atalante). So, are my students being penalized by my male perspective, a viewpoint that doesn't allow me to see the necessity of exploring gender issues in visual communication or fails to recognize the unhealthy acceptance of the traditional filmmaker pantheon, even if their successes were at the expense of others unfairly outcast?

One of my female colleagues teaches a class in Greek and Roman mythology. When I asked one of my advisees recently how the course was, she said she didn't really care for it because it wasn't about myth so much as about how sexism restricts and dehumanizes women in these stories. While I see that as an important issue, I would never focus the entire course in this manner. Is that because of my pedagogical or my gender orientation? I really don't know. I can say that I see the reason for

making some socially-corrective judgment calls in my classroom, so that I screen D.W. Griffith's Intolerance rather than The Birth of a Nation because I don't see the need for my students in film history to have to wade through blatant racism in order to learn about Griffith's significance as a film director. I still teach about Birth of a Nation, though, and show excerpts from it, because its impact is a vital part of American cinema and social history. Similarly, I don't find a need to show any number of financially-significant films that do little more than exploit the image of women, but I do show Gone with the Wind, despite its objectionable elements, because of the ambiguous portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara as both scheming bitch and hard-nosed survivor. It is also a significant technical, economic, and cultural experience while an Ida Lupino-directed film from the same era is not. Thus, the decisions for inclusion and exclusion in my classes probably represent another aspect of gender communication, in terms of how my male affiliation with success and influence is guiding my curriculum, but I really don't want my future filmmakers to go on to graduate and professional work without exposure to what I consider the essential stylistic innovations of directors such as John Ford, Orson Welles, Ingmar Bergman, and Spike Lee. I can't live with excluding any of these, so I end up with a very male-dominated semester, whether I'm teaching historical masterpieces or American mainstream. I wouldn't do that differently no matter what the student population, but at least I have been sensitized enough by Mills so that I'd show Julie Dash even if I were back at SMU. In fact, if I were sentenced to have to go back to SMU, I'd prefer to show Julie Dash just to open the eyes and experiences of many of the socialite male (and female) students I encountered there.

By now I feel that I'm rambling more than I'm contributing to my colleagues' curriculum suggestions. So, let me try to get back on track and conclude with some more concrete observations. First, until such a point in our society is reached that androgynous social orientations allow for a gender-free culture--if we even really want

that sort of environment to exist--all communication will have a gender perspective, no matter what the content is. There will be an undeniable gender presence in the author of the work under consideration, as well as in the faculty and students trying to deal with the course material. While it is useful and necessary to balance the number of male and female voices both in the classroom and in the curriculum, as well as to reveal the gender voice behind such "neutral" fields as design, economics, science, and math, we may find that the balance can be achieved just as well by incorporating the opinions and perspectives of our students as by radically changing our syllabi.

Second, I feel that our educational system must prepare our students for what they will face in the marketplace by acknowledging and analyzing what has been allowed to stand for success and progress over the years; just as we need to hear and honor diverse voices, we need to examine what has shaped our culture as we know it in order for our students to effectively reshape it in years to come. Finally, I am trying to learn to not equate "gender consciousness" just with "female exclusion," but rather with the artificial structuring of both men and women. Rather than rejecting the traditional canons of our disciplines as if our intellectual lifelines are clogged with Eurocentric white male cholesterol, I would rather that we use these traditional milestones--along with a healthy catalogue of other contributions--as examples of how males have been gendered over the centuries as well as females, how the position of privilege which seems so exclusionary to the excluded is also confining and dehumanizing to the seemingly elite. In understanding how destructive and restrictive certain aspects of the male "character" have been, I would also like to rescue some appreciation for strength, valor, and loyalty, as these attributes can be applied to personal growth and social betterment rather than just to domination and preservation of hollow tradition.

Being a male authority figure in a mostly female environment has not been a easy experience for me not only because I must challenge that authority myself in

admitting the failure of the patriarchal system that has led to the need for women's colleges but also because I understand that there is a level of student-teacher affiliation at Mills that I am not destined to share. My same female colleagues who so eagerly established sexual harassment guidelines last spring are often known to hug, cry, and joke with their students in ways that I would never feel comfortable with under these rules. I will never be understood by my students in the same way that they can relate to even the most reserved of female faculty because I will always represent in some small way an aspect of the system that has made this educational environment necessary. I have no regrets about being part of Mills College, and I am truly thankful for all that I have learned from every aspect of it, but I'll say again that it will be rare for me to actively teach a unit on the "gender aspects of" anything, because at Mills I am consciously, continuously untangling the realities of gender existence and communication every day of my life. But as long as that remains a healthy learning experience for all concerned, it's not a bad fate at all, and I continue to benefit from it. In closing, I'll suggest that most American men would also benefit from an experience such as mine in learning that gender communication is never just a curriculum component but a way of life that all of us must better share and understand.